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CHAPTER 9

Troubleshooting in the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Occasionally you will have to deal with problematic students who talk out of turn in class, plagiarize their work, or openly question your authority. As a result of their lack of experience and confidence, many new TAs have a hard time deciding how to respond to these students. Caught off guard, they may choose to ignore the situation or react defensively, missing an opportunity to address and solve the problem quickly. The best way to cope with these situations is to think about them ahead of time and prepare appropriate responses.

This chapter discusses different ways to address some of the problems that TAs face in introductory-level classes. I will emphasize one point repeatedly: never feel like you have to solve problems on your own. Wherever you teach, there are faculty members who will help—seek them out.

STUDENTS WHO DISRUPT CLASS

You may have students who do not know how to be quiet in class. Although teachers often want their students to participate in class, other times they want students to be quiet and listen. Some students have a hard time learning this lesson, interrupting others and monopolizing discussions by talking out of turn. Unfortunately, even one student like this can ruin a class. His or her actions make it difficult to teach the class and discourage other students from speaking up appropriately. You need to address disruptive students promptly and firmly.

Sometimes students talk with classmates while you are speaking. To stop this behavior, stop talking and stare at the disruptive students until they fall silent, walk toward the disruptive students while you speak until you get their attention, or confront them directly, asking them to be quiet. Sometimes you will have to quiet down every student in class. This situation often occurs at the beginning of class or when the students are working in small groups and you have to call everyone back to order. Get their attention by using a loud, firm voice or begin to write something on the blackboard. As a rule, students will stop talking and start to copy *anything* you place on the board.

If a particular student just will not be quiet in class, try talking to him individually outside of class. Ask the student to stay a moment after the others have left, and talk to him in the empty classroom or in your office. If the student does not have time to talk, set up an appointment. When you talk to students who behave this way, be straightforward. Tell them that you need to discuss their classroom behavior, describe the behavior that you think is disruptive, offer examples of when they have engaged in this behavior, explain why such behavior is unacceptable, and ask for their response. Listen respectfully to their explanations or apologies, then let them know that their disruptive behavior has to stop. If they continue to be disruptive in class, see your supervisor for advice. It may be that an administrator needs to talk to the students or even transfer them out of your class.

Most people want to avoid confrontations. Consequently, they often ignore problems, thinking they will solve themselves. This is how TAs often respond to disruptive students—they think that if they just ignore the situation, it will stop. Usually, though, this is the wrong approach to take. Truly disruptive students will often escalate their behavior until they get a response. They will try to draw other students to their “side,” silence anyone who challenges them, and make themselves the center of attention in the classroom. Address the problem quickly so it does not build. Remain calm and judicious. You know such behavior is not acceptable in your class, so operate from that position—let these students know that they must change the way they act.

STUDENTS WHO ARE SILENT IN CLASS

Sometimes the opposite problem occurs—you run into a group of students who never seem willing to speak up in class. No matter what you try, the students just do not care to participate. They would rather sit passively and take notes

while you talk. There are times, of course, when this is just what you want, but there are other times when you want your students to discuss a reading, ask questions about an assignment, or just let you know if they are satisfied with the course. Unresponsive students are a problem in these situations, but there are a few things you can do to encourage more class participation.

First, consider the way you respond to your students in class. Sometimes the way teachers interact with students can discourage them from speaking up. For example, a few years ago I had a colleague ask me for help. He said he was having a hard time getting his students to participate in his literature class, and he was tired of lecturing. He asked me to come watch his class and offer advice. I sat in the back of the room the next time the class met and quickly found out why this teacher’s students were so quiet. The professor asked a question about the novel the students were reading, and one student offered an answer. The professor’s response was so negative and sarcastic that the student’s face turned red and he remained silent the rest of the class. Another student tried to answer a follow-up question and received similar treatment. The rest of the professor’s questions went unanswered, and the professor grew obviously impatient at the long silences in class. He finally gave up, threw me a “see what I mean” glance, and lectured the rest of the period. I tried to figure out how to tell this professor he needed to change the way he spoke to his students if he expected them to participate in class.

Second, examine your own attitudes and behavior. Some teachers can assume a confrontational relationship with their students and succeed, but not many. Students are more likely to take part in classes where the teacher develops an atmosphere of trust and respect. If students feel their teacher will take their comments seriously and will not intimidate or ridicule them, they are much more likely to participate actively in class. Consider these points: do you value your students’ opinions? Do you listen carefully and respectfully to what they have to say? Do you respond in a way that encourages students to elaborate on their views? Do you urge others to join in?

Third, examine whether your students truly have the opportunity to talk in your class. When teaching, how do you encourage participation? What activities do you think will get students talking? Do you just expect it to happen spontaneously? If you do, you will likely be disappointed. Teachers who want their students to take part in class build into their course opportunities for that to happen; several techniques are described below.

1. Ask the right kinds of questions.

During class discussions, asking factual questions such as, “How does the author open his essay?” will generate less response than asking speculative questions such as, “The author opens her essay with a quotation. Why does she do this? Do you think it works?” Ask questions that require your students to think and to solve problems, that cannot be easily answered. Posing the right kinds of questions and responding positively to your students’ responses can greatly improve class participation.

2. Link writing and speaking activities.

Writing something first gives students a chance to think about the topic and articulate their opinions, increasing the likelihood that they will speak up in class. For example, ask your students to write briefly about a topic before they discuss it. Ask them to answer a question you write on the board, respond to a quotation from a text, or reflect on their own knowledge and experience. If no one responds when you open the discussion, ask a few students to read aloud what they wrote and see if the other students agree or disagree. Before you or your students know it, the discussion will be going strong.

3. Employ collaborative learning techniques.

Divide your students into small groups to work on projects before reporting to the class as a whole. Sometimes students who are reluctant to speak up in front of the entire class will talk more freely in a small group of students (see Chapter 7 for tips on forming and supervising group work in class). As students converse in their groups, circulate and encourage everyone to join in. Try then to transfer the energy and conversation of the small groups to the entire class by having each group summarize its work. Well-planned group activities can result in debates in which different groups have to assume and defend different positions on an issue or different interpretations of material. Small group work establishes a new dynamic in the classroom that often facilitates participation, especially among shy students.

4. Require oral reports.

Assign individual students to give brief, five- to ten- minute reports on any topic related to the class or ask groups of students to give longer reports (see Chapter 7 for more tips on how to incorporate group reports in a writing class). To promote discussion, ask certain students to serve as respondents for each oral report, summarizing and critiquing what they heard. A series of oral reports and responses followed by class discussions can involve most students.

5. Call on unresponsive students by name.

Calling on students forces their participation. Understand, though, that because many students do not like being called on, this strategy can spur resentment if handled poorly. If a student clearly has no response, do not engage in prolonged public embarrassment. Move on to another student. If this happens frequently with the same student, you may want to speak to him or her outside of class. The student may be having problems with the course.

6. Arrive at your class early.

Engage in informal conversation with a few students before class. Ask them about their weekend plans, their other classes, their favorite television show, anything. When the class starts, just keep the conversation going for a little while. During class, if no one is responding to your questions or prompts, return to those students. Ask them what they think. Continue the discussion by speaking directly to others nearby, eventually pulling more and more students into the conversation.

7. Schedule brief conferences.

If a class remains unresponsive despite your best efforts, schedule a five- to ten-minute conference with each student. During each conference, share your observations about the course and your desire to have everyone participate more fully. Ask your students what would make them feel more comfortable in class and what topics they would like to discuss. These conferences can work wonders and dramatically increase your students' participation in class.

STUDENTS WHO CHALLENGE YOU IN CLASS

Because you are a TA, students may be more willing to question your expertise, fairness, or competence than they would be to question the knowledge and authority of a professor. How you respond depends largely on the nature of the challenge. For example, sometimes it is hard to distinguish between curiosity and confrontation. How would you interpret a student asking, "How old are you anyway?" A TA I worked with thought this question was a challenge to her authority and answered, "Old enough to teach you." The student did not ask again. Other TAs who heard this story thought the question was innocent—the student was being curious, not confrontational.

Often challenges are nonverbal. Students who question your competence may sigh or moan when you give assignments, roll their eyes, glance knowingly at their peers, shake their heads, fall asleep at their desks, skip class, or engage in other types of disruptive behavior in class. I have seen many TAs react to such disrespectful behavior by "getting tough," adopting the position that students will respect their authority more if they start to quiz them every day, grade their papers more harshly, or adopt a sterner classroom persona. Sometimes these responses can help, but not usually. Instead, students tend to respect teachers who (1) use class time wisely, (2) offer valuable instruction, and (3) are organized and fair. If you feel that your students misbehave in class because they do not respect your authority, examine your teaching methods first and the way you interact with your students. Making adjustments along these lines may get you better results than becoming a "bad cop" teacher.

If a student questions your expertise, and you feel that you need to respond, be honest about your qualifications to teach. Let the student know about your educational background, your experience as a writer and teacher, the selection process the department used to choose TAs, the training procedures you went through, the relevant course work you have taken, or the degree work you have completed. As always, have these conversations with students *outside* of class, never in class.

You may find challenges to your qualifications distressing because of your own insecurities. Many new TAs question their own readiness to teach—they do not yet feel like "real" teachers themselves. However, these

feelings usually dissipate during the TA's first semester of teaching: grading that first set of student papers usually assures new TAs that there is a lot they can teach their students about writing. If you continue to feel uncertain about your ability to teach, talk to your supervisor. Most of the faculty members who supervise TAs are strong teachers themselves, interested in helping you become a more effective instructor. Also, talk to your peers. Many of them likely feel or have felt the same way themselves and can offer their support.

Other times students may challenge your fairness as an instructor. For example, some may accuse you of treating them unfairly in class. These complaints often rest on precedent: "You didn't act this way with student X, so why are you acting this way with me?" or "My high school teacher did or did not do X, so why are you?" In most cases, you can answer these challenges by pointing out how the situations are not the same: this student's case is, in important ways, different than the case of student X, or the actions of high school teachers will necessarily differ from the actions of college teachers. But if a student makes a persuasive case, be willing to reconsider your position. Tell the student you will look at the work again and give him or her a final decision later. Take as much time as you need to think through the issue. If you doubt the course of action you took, ask your faculty supervisor or peers for advice. Give them the facts of the matter and see if they agree with what you did or if they can offer an alternative. Once you reach your final decision, inform the student and explain your reasons.

If a student becomes belligerent or overly aggressive when challenging your authority or fairness, tell your teaching supervisor. If you ever feel threatened or intimidated by a student, get help immediately. Do not ignore the situation, hoping it will just resolve itself. It will not. You should never feel like you have to address these problems alone. There is always help and support available. Go see your teaching supervisor.

STUDENTS WHO DISPUTE GRADES

Do not be surprised when students dispute grades. This happens to almost every instructor. However, grade disputes pose particular problems if you are a new, inexperienced TA evaluating student work for the first time. Experienced teachers have developed standards for evaluating student work; most new TAs have not. As a result, many TAs lack confidence in their ability to evaluate student work and feel uncomfortable addressing student complaints (see Chapter 6 for advice on how to grade student papers fairly and on developing standards of evaluation). Dealing with disputes over grades can be emotionally taxing. New TAs especially tend to feel that their judgment is being questioned—which might well be true—and react defensively. TAs who are unsure about their grading standards or insecure about assuming authority as an evaluator of student writing

may opt to give complaining students the grades they want. Others give all of their students high grades, believing that will prevent complaints. There are better courses of action to take.

If a student questions a grade in class, make an appointment with the student to discuss the matter further. When the student arrives at your office, assume control of the meeting. If a student is irate, abusive, or unwilling to listen, end the conference. Tell the student to leave and schedule a new meeting when he or she has calmed down. If a student is ready to discuss the grade calmly, ask the student if there is anything you marked or wrote on the paper that he or she does not understand or any error he or she does not know how to correct. Answer any specific questions the student has about your comments on the paper. Then go through the paper with the student, pointing out what you marked and why, offering suggestions on how to fix any problems you see and build on any strengths. As you talk through the paper together, most students come to see why the paper received its grade. If they still have questions, summarize the grading standards you use in the course and your particular expectations for this assignment, and then point out specific places in the paper where the student did or did not meet those standards and expectations. If the student is still not satisfied at that point, there is little else you can do except to offer your help on the next assignment.

Because you are a TA, some students may ask you to let someone else (probably a professor) review a disputed paper to see what grade that person would give it. Behind this request is the unstated assumption that as a TA, you are not a "real" teacher—a "real" teacher would have given the paper a different (i.e., higher) grade. Whether you ask someone else to look at the paper is up to you. Most TA supervisors are willing to review a disputed paper and tell you what grade they would have given it. Just be sure to conduct this consultation outside the student's presence.

If the student remains unsatisfied, you have a few options left: tell the student the matter is over and advise the student to move on to the next assignment, allow the student to rewrite the paper, or refer the student to your supervisor. Rewriting the paper allows the student to take advantage of your comments and conversations. The final grade for the assignment is either the rewrite grade or an average of the first grade and the second—the choice is yours. There are times when rewriting a graded paper helps the student mature as a writer, but these rewrites greatly increase your workload, so consider carefully whether you want to make this a common practice. Finally, if a student is just not going to be satisfied with any course of action you take, refer him or her to your teaching supervisor.

Sometimes when reviewing a paper, you may decide you assigned the wrong grade. If you feel you graded too harshly, you can give the student a higher grade; just be sure to explain the basis of the change. Do not, however, lower a grade on review. That type of action seems vindictive. If you realize the grade is too high, just leave it, tell the student the grade is more than justified, and revise your standards as needed for the next set of papers.

STUDENTS WHO MAKE INAPPROPRIATE COMMENTS IN CLASS

Occasionally you will have students say something inappropriate in class, comments that are rude, ignorant, or prejudiced. Addressing students who make inappropriate comments in class can be challenging: you do not want to stifle discussion, yet these comments actually squelch debate, creating an uncomfortable atmosphere that works against the free flow of ideas.

When students make inappropriate comments, you can either ignore them or address them. If you choose to address them, you have several options: say something to the offending student in class, talk to the student outside of class, or invite other students to voice their opinions. If you choose to address the comments in class, decide how confrontational to be. Some teachers like to speak directly to the student, telling him or her that such comments are not acceptable. However, a public confrontation like this can be risky. While it may embarrass the student into silence, it may also cause the student to argue with you in class. As a teacher, you must consider how well you could handle such an argument and how it would affect the other students.

Other teachers prefer to address the situation in class more subtly. A common technique is to paraphrase the student's comments, giving the student an opportunity to clarify his or her position. Students speaking off the cuff often misstate their opinions in class, choosing language that misrepresents their true positions. Paraphrasing the comments helps students hear what they have actually said or implied, giving them a chance to restate their views. Once the student clarifies or explains his or her position, you or the student's peers can respond. The goal of this strategy is to use the student's comments as a teaching opportunity, to get the student to rethink his or her position, and to model for all the students how to confront and debate controversial or biased comments.

Finally, some teachers rely on peer pressure to address the problem of inappropriate comments. They encourage students to speak up if they disagree with or object to a peer's statements or, after paraphrasing such a comment, directly ask other students whether they agree with their peer's position. Students often reconsider their comments if several peers voice dissenting views.

If a student habitually makes disruptive comments in class, you need to address the problem differently. Ask the student to meet you in your office. During this conference, describe the behavior you find objectionable, explain why it is not acceptable, and ask the student to stop. Give the student a chance to respond, but let him or her know that these comments will not be tolerated in your class. If they do not stop, contact your teaching supervisor—the student might need to be removed from class. If you think the student is likely to be confrontational during the conference, have another TA in the office with you when the student comes. If you fear at all for your safety, have your teaching supervisor present for the meeting.

Never tolerate harassment of any kind in your class. If a student makes racist, sexist, or other offensive comments to you or to any student, see your teaching supervisor immediately. Also, keep a record of what was said in case

the student ever faces disciplinary action. Never let a student make you feel uncomfortable as a teacher, and never let a student intimidate other students. As the classroom instructor, you need to stand firm and resolve the situation.

STUDENTS WHO PLAGIARIZE WORK

Plagiarism can be a difficult problem to address because it can assume many forms, some more serious than others. Plagiarism can range from a student's failure to supply proper citations for paraphrased material to deliberate fraud, such as turning in an essay purchased from an on-line paper mill. How to address an incidence of plagiarism in your class depends largely on the particulars: who the student is, what he or she did or failed to do, and when in the course it occurs.

Forms of Plagiarism

For most academics, plagiarism involves passing off another person's work as your own. This definition sounds simple enough until you begin to look at particular instances. Consider, for example, differences between intentional and unintentional plagiarism. In introductory-level college classes, students unfamiliar with the documentation conventions of academic discourse may plagiarize work unintentionally. These are all forms of plagiarism:

1. *In his paper, a student copies material from a source text word for word without placing it in quotation marks and without documenting it.*

This seems to be a fairly straightforward example of plagiarism: copying material from a source text and presenting it as your own work. But what if the student truly believes that copying material from a source text is sometimes acceptable? Several students have told me that in high school, they were taught that copying material from a reference work, such as an encyclopedia, without quoting or documenting it is acceptable because the information is "common knowledge." Most college teachers would consider the practice plagiarism, but the student thought he was acting in an acceptable manner.

2. *In her paper, a student copies a passage from a source text word for word, provides proper documentation, but does not place the material in quotation marks.*

Again, most college teachers would say this practice constitutes plagiarism. The student gives the author credit for his or her ideas through the documentation but fails to give the author proper credit for his or her language (no quotation marks). This form of plagiarism frequently results from faulty note taking. As they conduct research, students copy passages from source texts into their notes but fail to place quotation marks around the material. When they write their paper, they simply copy the passages from their notes, supply the proper documentation, and turn in the essay. They are not trying to deceive anyone—they supplied the proper documentation. They simply have poor note-taking skills.

3. In his paper, a student paraphrases a passage but fails to provide proper documentation.

In this case, the student uses his own language to convey information but commits plagiarism when he fails to give the author of the source text proper credit for his or her ideas through proper documentation. Again, this form of plagiarism occurs frequently because students are unfamiliar with the conventions of academic discourse. When you inform them that all paraphrased material needs to be documented, they often moan, "But that means EVERYTHING in my paper will be documented!" To avoid this problem, students need to learn how to blend their ideas and language with material from their source texts, properly documenting every passage.

While these first three forms of plagiarism usually result from inattention or unfamiliarity with the standards of academic discourse, other forms are clearly more fraudulent in nature. Consider these examples, any of which might occur in your class:

1. A student purchases a paper from an on-line or mail-order company and turns it in as her own.

In this case, the student has actively searched out a company that provides students with complete papers on the topic of their choice. She bought the paper, put her name on it, and turned it in for a grade. This student has deliberately perpetuated an academic fraud. (See Chapter 8 for more information on paper mills and plagiarism detection sites on the Internet.)

2. A student has a friend or roommate write a paper for him or "borrows" his friend's paper and turns it in as his own.

This form of plagiarism occurs frequently. Students taking different sections of the same composition course may turn in identical papers, believing that their teachers will not detect the fraud. You may even run into cases where students in different sections of the same course you teach turn in identical papers, again believing that you will not notice (these students believe that their teachers do not actually read all those papers!).

3. A student takes another student's paper without that student's knowledge and turns it in as her own.

I faced this situation recently. A TA suspected plagiarism—the paper he was reading just did not sound like the other papers this student had written and the student had switched paper topics a day before the essay was due. I looked at the essay and recognized it as a paper one of my students had turned in two weeks earlier. I asked my student about it, and he was genuinely amazed: he had not shared his paper with anyone and did not even know the other student. A little investigation by the TA determined that his student knew my student's roommate. The roommate had downloaded my student's paper and passed it along to the TA's student without my student's knowledge. Clearly, attempts to plagiarize work can result in complex intrigue!

Plagiarism covers a range of academic infractions; in fact, it may be one of the most ill-defined concepts in academics. At the same time, though, it carries

some of the most serious consequences: plagiarizing work can result in a failed paper, an "F" for the course, or even dismissal from a degree program. Teachers can help their students avoid these problems if they take a few simple steps.

Helping Students Avoid Plagiarism

Discuss plagiarism frequently in your classes, not just once at the beginning of the term or once when your students begin a research project. In these discussions, define which acts constitute plagiarism and teach your students how to avoid these problems. Employing a case approach is often helpful. Provide your students with a range of plagiarism scenarios (see Figure 9.1 for samples) and discuss their responses. Which acts, in their view, constitute plagiarism? Which do not? Why? Which constitute it in your mind? Explain your answers. These discussions allow you to address any misconceptions your students harbor about plagiarism.

Editing exercises also help. Ask your students to revise several plagiarized passages, identifying and correcting the errors. You can create these samples yourself or pull them from your students' work.

Finally, you can discourage students from plagiarizing work by making it more difficult to accomplish. For example, you can require students to submit their paper topics for your approval and not allow them to change topics

FIGURE 9.1 Plagiarism Scenarios

Read each scenario below and decide if you think the student is guilty of plagiarism. Be ready to explain your decision when you discuss your responses in class.

1. A student copies part of his paper from an encyclopedia and documents it.
2. A student copies part of his paper from an encyclopedia, places it in quotation marks, but does not document it.
3. A student borrows a friend's paper, copies the opening paragraph, but writes the rest of the essay herself.
4. A student purchases a paper from an on-line service, puts her name on it, and turns it in for a grade.
5. A student paraphrases a passage from a magazine article but does not document the material in his paper.
6. A student copies several passages from a source text and properly quotes and documents all but one of them.
7. A student quotes and documents a passage but lists the wrong page number in the documentation.
8. A student turns in a paper she originally wrote in high school without telling her current teacher.
9. A student borrows a friend's paper and organizes his exactly the same way without copying any material and without documenting the fact that he follows his friend's outline.
10. A student turns in the same paper in two different classes without telling the teachers.

without your permission. Many students put off writing papers and, in desperation, purchase, borrow, or download an essay a day or two before it is due, regardless of the topic. You can also require students to turn in rough drafts of their work: if students buy or borrow someone else's work, they have to write or obtain a rough draft for it too, which might encourage them to do their own work from the beginning. I also require students to turn in photocopies of every source text they cite in their paper. If I think a passage might be plagiarized because it lacks quotation marks or is poorly paraphrased, I can check it against the photocopied source material. With this requirement in place, if students want to purchase their papers, they also have to gather and duplicate the paper's source texts. I do not accept a paper without the photocopies.

Dealing with Plagiarism

Despite a teacher's best efforts, however, students will plagiarize work. Handling instances of plagiarism requires tact and sound judgment. First, let your teaching supervisor know if you suspect a student has plagiarized a paper and get his or her advice on how to proceed. Most writing programs have specific procedures they want you to follow. Next, have evidence in hand before you directly confront a student: accusing someone of plagiarism is serious. If you suspect plagiarism, ask to see the student's rough draft or notes and ask the student to explain the process he or she followed when writing the paper. The material and answers the student supplies may help confirm or assuage your concerns.

Handling instances of unintentional plagiarism is typically left to your discretion as the classroom teacher. As you decide on a course of action, keep in mind your primary goal as a teacher: instead of simply failing the essay, consider making the student revise it and fix the errors. Revising the paper teaches the student more than just receiving an "F" does. If, however, you suspect the student is trying to perpetrate an academic fraud—that he or she has purchased, borrowed, or stolen a paper—and you have proof, talk to your supervisor. Your department or school likely has procedures for you to follow.

COLLEGE STUDENTS: A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

First-year college students can be a real joy to teach, but they can also be a real challenge. Most are undergoing substantial changes in their lives, learning to live on their own, making new friends, choosing a career. Better understanding your students' intellectual development in college can help you better understand their behavior in class and teach them more effectively.

Over the past five decades, many researchers have charted the intellectual development of college students. Such pioneering work as William Perry's *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development*, Mary Belenky and colleagues' *Women's*

Ways of Knowing, and Patricia King and Karen Kitchener's *Developing Reflective Judgment* offer useful insights into the way college students view themselves, their peers, their teachers, and their education. Though they couch their findings in different terms, these researchers all recognize similar broad stages of development most college students pass through on their way to graduation: dualism, multiplism, relativism, and commitment.

Dualism

Many students enter college viewing knowledge and authority from a dualistic perspective. They tend to believe that all questions have a single correct answer and that all problems—abortion, global warming, crime—have a single valid solution. They believe their task as college students is to learn these right answers and valid solutions. Little thought is necessary on their part: the faculty members are "experts" who teach the facts and tell them what is right and true. If teachers do not do this in class, these students tend to have one of two responses: they either dismiss the teacher as incompetent or believe the teacher is playing a game—the teacher knows the right answer but wants students to find it on their own.

In an introductory writing class, students who view knowledge and authority dualistically tend to believe there is one right way to compose a paper. If they follow the right "process" when writing their paper, they will get an "A." For them, writing is a rule-driven activity: everything about writing should be as definitive as the requirement to place a punctuation mark at the end of a sentence. If these students get low grades on their papers, they may confront their teacher with the common plea: "Just tell me what I have to do to get an 'A' in here." Again, they expect a simple, direct answer. The instructor's job is to teach them *the* writing process, to tell them exactly how to compose successful papers. They may severely question the authority of teachers who do not provide these guidelines, especially if these teachers are young TAs. In their minds, these teachers are either incompetent or are playing games by refusing to tell them the answer.

Students who view knowledge and authority dualistically often find college overwhelming because so few simple answers exist. College challenges their world view and the adjustment can be difficult.

Multiplism

Many students cope by moving into multiplism, the next stage of development. Students who view knowledge and authority from a multiplistic perspective have abandoned the dualistic notion that single correct answers exist for every problem. Instead, they recognize that people can maintain a range of equally valid positions on issues: "You have your ideas, I have mine, and we can both be right." They do not draw qualitative distinctions among positions; all views are equally sound or good. In a writing class, a student may

have one way of organizing a paper and her roommate a different way, and they can both be right. In a debate over abortion rights, her roommate may be pro-choice and she may be pro-life, but neither has a right to call the other person wrong. In fact, from this point of view, college is a time of growth because students get exposed to so many different perspectives on issues.

Problems occur for these students in class, though, when teachers grade their work. From a multiplistic perspective, the teacher's claim to "truth" is no more valid than anyone else's claim: "I have my way of writing and the teacher has hers. Both are equally valid." These students tend to see grading as arbitrary and idiosyncratic. While they might agree that "rules" govern grammar and punctuation, everything else about writing is a matter of personal taste and choice. Teachers give low grades because (a) they do not like a student's "style" of writing, (b) they want to punish anyone who does not "write like them," or (c) they simply do not like the student personally.

Relativism

Over time, students begin to understand how their grades are related to disciplinary standards and conventions, an insight that eases their transition into the next perspective on knowledge and authority, relativism. Moving from class to class in college, they learn how to gather and critique evidence and information, evaluate positions, form arguments, and defend interpretations in discipline-specific ways. In fact, qualitative reasoning is the hallmark of this developmental perspective: students viewing knowledge and authority from a relativistic perspective understand that claims must be based on commonly accepted, disciplinary standards of evaluation. In their classes, students viewing the world from a relativistic perspective can make qualitative judgments about writing, including their own, and become fluent in the discourse and inquiry practices of their major.

Commitment

Commitment is the final position in most schemes of student intellectual development. Students viewing knowledge and authority from this perspective define their own positions on issues, commit themselves to particular ideologies, and develop their own philosophy of life. A hallmark of commitment is what educator John McPeck calls "reflective skepticism." People operating out of reflective skepticism understand the tentative nature of knowledge. They can commit themselves to a position but remain open to change: new information or experience may cause them to change their minds. They do not maintain positions with the blind passion of a dualistic thinker. Instead, they understand that the search for knowledge never ends and actively question what they understand to be true and just. They are not afraid to grow and change; in fact, they often seek out diverse points of view just to test the validity of their current beliefs. For them, teachers represent one of the best sources

of intellectual challenge—they understand that teachers and students work together to investigate topics, question perspectives, debate positions, and clarify thought.

Teachers working in introductory composition and literature classes should understand how their students' perspectives on knowledge and authority can affect their work in class. How students define their role in the classroom, how they interpret the instruction you offer, how they respond to grades, and how they interact with their peers are all influenced by their level of intellectual development. As a classroom teacher, you should design curricula that promote your students' growth. For example, students viewing knowledge and authority dualistically should learn how to recognize and grant validity to alternative points of view; those operating from a multiplistic perspective should learn how to evaluate alternative points of view; students viewing knowledge and authority relativistically should learn how to make commitments in their lives yet remain open to change. All studies agree that intellectual development is slow and individualistic. Yet it also seems to be fairly predictable: if students stay in college, these changes will likely occur, though when they happen and how they manifest themselves will vary greatly. Supporting your students' intellectual development is easier if you understand the struggles they face as they learn to think about knowledge and authority in increasingly more sophisticated ways.

CONCLUSION

As a teacher, you need to help your students learn how to succeed in college—how to set goals, meet deadlines, and work with others. To accomplish this goal, set clear classroom policies and enforce them fairly. When conflicts arise in the classroom, remember to stay calm, decide nothing rashly, and look for teaching opportunities. Treating students with respect and consideration is the best course of action—how you interact with your students models the behavior you expect from them.

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